

**Edoardo Corradi**

University of Genoa

**VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: RE-SHAPING THE ISLAMIST TERRORIST PHENOMENON IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE**

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**Author**

Edoardo Corradi holds a B.A. and an M.A. in International Relations at the University of Genoa. He is currently a PhD student at the same university, where he is carrying out research on foreign fighters and civil wars. Moreover, he is interested in Western Balkan domestic affairs and the European enlargement in South-eastern Europe.

ORCID no. 0000-0002-3488-8605

e-mail: edoardo.corradi@edu.unige.it

**Abstract**

This paper aims to shed new light on the phenomenon of Islamist violent extremism across the Western Balkans. This phenomenon has recently drawn worldwide attention due to the risk that the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) has raised as an international actor. The main theoretical argument is that the main driver of foreign fighters aligns with the Roy theory about the “Islamization of radicalism”. So far, academic literature on Islamist terrorism has often considered the Western Balkan region as the one with the highest percentage of foreign fighters. Notwithstanding this being correct, such analysis seems superficial, since it misrepresents the image of the region itself. In this paper, the countries taken into account are those with a high percentage of Muslim population (e.g. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) and with a large Muslim autochthonous minority group (e.g. the Republic of North Macedonia). The comparison of the estimates of foreign fighters in Syria from the Western Balkans with data from several sources led us to understand the existence of a precise narrative towards the region and the Islamist religion.

**Keywords:** Islamist terrorism, Western Balkans, radicalization, foreign fighters, Balkanism**Introduction**

The emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in Syria brought attention to the phenomenon of foreign fighters and a new kind of terrorism. Within this, the presence of a large number of Muslims from the Western Balkans highlighted the potential issue within the same region. In fact, the Syrian war exposed several countries to deal with the problem of foreign fighters. In the meantime, several data sets show a more realistic number of those volunteers who have fought in Syria or still continue to do so. Western Balkan countries are largely considered as the ones that have so far provided the largest number of foreign fighters compared with the domestic makeup of Muslim population. If it is true that the number of people who flew to Syria is high, this number has to be analysed once

again in light of the religious composition of Western Balkan countries. The research relies on Olivier Roy's theory about "Islamization of radicalism", in which younger persons became foreign fighters not because they are Islamist, but because they are radicals. The Islamic State, according to Roy, catalyzed the anger and frustration of unemployed, hopeless young people, who embrace the IS' version of Islam to have a concrete goal (Roy 2017).

Because of this, the main purpose of this paper is to take into account only the countries whose population is majority Muslim, or with a large minority (more than the 25%) of Muslim autochthonous. For the purpose of this paper, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Republic of North Macedonia are the countries to deal with. Therefore, this paper shall prove that Western Balkan countries are not a factory for foreign fighters for Syria. This hypothesis is aimed at pointing out how a so-called "Balkanist narrative" (Todorova, 1994, 2009; Hammond, 2006; Hetemi, 2015) is still present and negatively affects the image of these countries.

Based on a descriptive method, this paper methodologically compares the average number of foreign fighters from the above-mentioned countries with their respectively Muslim populations. Despite there being a number of converted foreign fighters, it is usually Muslims who are those with a higher possibility of Islamist radicalization, even to violence. We can figure out that the results change the perception of the phenomenon, and if it is compared with other European countries, we can have a better overview of the impact of the foreign fighters and violent radicalised people with the total population.

While, these essential data are here employed in order to view the real ethnic and religious composition according to the latest national census, the numbers of foreign fighters are taken from different publications (e.g. Barrett, 2014, 2017; Azinović & Jusić, 2015, 2016; Kursani, 2015; Muji, 2017; Shtuni, 2015).

In conclusion, this shall suggest how certain indicators may (not) lead to understanding future terrorist threats. Nevertheless, both positive and negative indicators, which cannot be taken for granted in predicting future scenarios, can be employed to shed light on potential phenomena that might play a negative role in potential radicalization and/or Islam-constructed form of terrorism. At the same time, several questions are raised. In general, in my view, further research needs to be conducted in this field of study; in particular, more precise investigations have to be pursued in order to look beneath the role that foreign fighters' expertise might (not) play in increasing terrorist threats; the practice that foreign fighters use for training to potential terrorists and preparing them to commit terrorist attacks, on the rationale behind foreign fighters' insurgency and reasons to return back to their countries of origin.

The article is divided in three sections. In the first part, I review the existing literature to set the boundaries of the foreign fighters' phenomenon. In the main section, I examine the literature in which the Western Balkans are considered as a security threat, whether because of the presence of Salafi communities in the countries or the presence of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and I analyze the current data on Muslim populations and foreign fighters in the Western Balkans and Europe. The third part describes some indicators that could lead the Western Balkans to be a future threat due to the returning of the current foreign fighters to their countries, later performing terrorist attacks in the region or elsewhere.

## Defining foreign fighters: terrorists or rebels?

The phenomenon of foreign fighters and Islamist terrorism was born during the conflict between the Soviet Union and the rebels in Afghanistan in the 1970s. The invasion of the country by Soviet troops and the emergence of personalities like ʿAbd Allāh Yūsuf al-ʿAzzām and Osāma bin Lāden were the main triggers to the rise of global Islamist terrorism (Hegghammer 2020). They relied on the ideology of the Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb, considered to be the theoretical father of modern jihadism (Wiktorowicz, 2005, 2006; Hegghammer, 2010). The literature is quite wide about the definition of “foreign fighters”, and several scholars tried to give a precise interpretation of the phenomenon. Thomas Hegghammer (2010, p. 53) defines “foreign fighters” as “unpaid combatants with no apparent link to the conflict other than religious affinity with the Muslim side”. David Malet (2013, p. 9) defines foreign fighters as “non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts”, subsequently underlining the absence of payments or enrolling in national armies. Similarly, to Hegghammer and Malet, Piotr Bąkowski and Laura Puccio (2016), in a report for the European Parliament, stress in their definition the subordination of the economic factor to the ideological or religious. The last definition we take into account is the one of the Security Council of the United Nations. In Resolution 2178 they introduce the concept of foreign terrorist fighters, meaning those “who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict” (UNSC 2014, p. 2). Hegghammer, in his definition, points out a difference between terrorists and foreign fighters, defining terrorists as specialised “in out-of-area violence against noncombatants” (2010, p. 57).

These different definitions gave us the possibility to create a common pattern to define the foreign fighters, according to the definitions collected. These criteria of the pattern are summarised in the table 1.

**Table 1.** A foreign fighters definition (Hegghammer, 2010)

Common factors of the foreign fighters			
Joining and operating in an insurgency	Non-citizenship and no direct link with the State of the conflict	No affiliation in a national army	Absence of an economic factor

The difference pointed out by Hegghammer between terrorists and foreign fighters is important in order to understand the real essence of the phenomenon. Foreign fighters, in fact, should be considered more as rebels than terrorists. Rebels are usually defined as “coordinated groups whose members engage in protracted violence with the intention of gaining undisputed political control over all or a portion of a pre-existing state’s territory” (Kasfir, p. 2015, 24), while Péclard and Mechoulan define them as those who “take up arms against the state and attempt to subvert the established order by violent means” (2015, p. 10). Foreign fighters, in Hegghammer’s definition, are closer to rebels than terrorists. Both use violence as a means to carry out their political program. Rebels, carrying

out their goals, use terrorism, but they differ from terrorists in their broader strategy. Charles Tilly describes terror as an “asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies outside the form of political struggle routinely operating within the current regime” (2004, p. 8). Moreover, terrorism is defined as “politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents” (Ruby, 2002, 10). Foreign fighters use terrorism in two different ways: the first as a war tactic, like facilitating the conquest of cities, as the example of the conquest of Mosul in 2014 (Neuman, 2016, p. 72–74), while the second as an extra strategic weapon after the decision of Western countries to shift the war against the Islamic State.

Foreign fighters, despite their definition, have to be included while analysing Islamist insurgencies in the broader category of jihadists. Their main duty is, in fact, to carry on the combat action during civil wars and insurgencies. Their role in terrorism is in fact narrower.

### **The Western Balkans as a forge for foreign fighters**

The main hypothesis of this paper is that the Western Balkans are not a cradle of foreign fighters. In order to answer to this hypothesis, the need to analyse different factors should be pointed out, such as the percentage of Muslim population per each country of origin, the total numbers of foreign fighters, the percentage of foreign fighters from the whole population and the percentage of foreign fighters of the Muslim population. These data are useful if compared with other countries, also enlightening the nature of Islam in the Western Balkans.

H1: The Western Balkans are not a cradle of foreign fighters.

The Syrian conflict has renewed attention to foreign fighters from the Western Balkans. This region, in fact, due to the high presence of Muslim citizens, has been a source for international Muslim terrorism. Its proximity with the European borders in general and Italian ones in particular, in combination with its belonging to Europe understood as a continent, are factors which have exposed the Balkan region to sharper attention. This paper takes into analysis the Western Balkan countries with a majority, or at least a large minority (at least the 25% of the population), of Muslim citizens, i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and the Republic of North Macedonia.

As I shall describe below, different analysis and studies report Western Balkans as being a jihadist high-risk region. The literature is quite old in some cases, and their predictions were wrong. I use this literature because, even if it is not new, it is the one that created that narrative I will oppose in the paper. Danuta Gibas-Krzak states that the Bosnian civil war has been the main entrance door for the Salafism and the jihadism in the region. The external influence of Middle East regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran brought to the Western Balkans the idea of radical Islam. In this context, Gibas-Krzak affirmed that “the fact that terrorist bases exist on the territory of south-eastern Europe constitutes a real threat to stability and safety of the Old continent” (2013, p. 217). Moreover, Nadia Alexandrova-Arbatova wrote that “an Islamist movement could develop to form a coalition between the Muslims in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Sandžak and Albania” (2004, p. 371). Leslie S. Lebl in his book “Islamism and Security in Bosnia-Herzegovina”

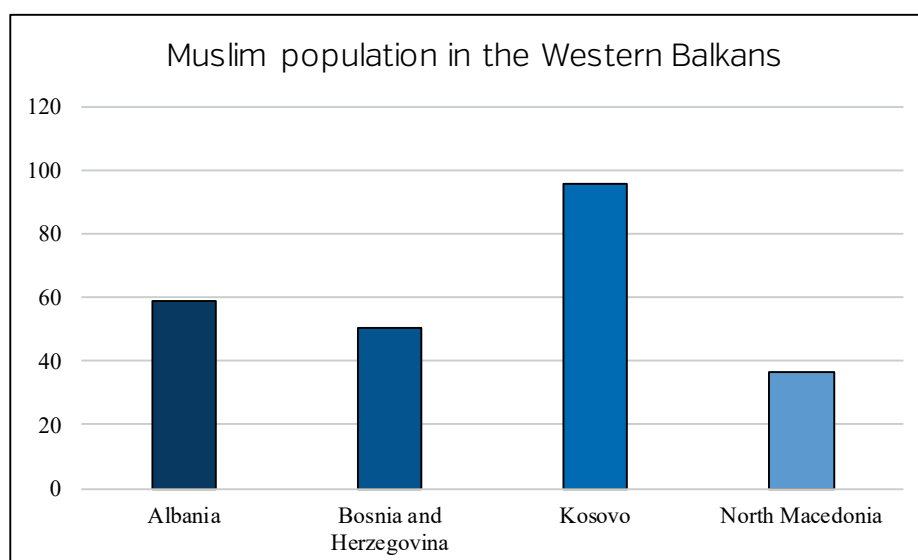
depicts the country as a cradle of terrorists and potential foreign fighters, with part of the country controlled by Salafis (2014, p. 14–5). Moreover, he points out the direct connection between high-level Bosnian politicians and radical islamists. But Lebl contradicts himself trying to demonstrate this connection. In fact, showing the link between Bakir Izetbegović and Islamism, he wrote “Bakir [...] was involved in the construction of the King Fahd Mosque [...]. This mosque, the largest house of worship for Muslims in the Balkans, is also known for its key role as the center of Wahhabi influence and power in Bosnia” (Lebl, 2014, p. 17). Then, he underlines his close ties with Iran, built during his presidency (Lebl 2014, p. 18–9).

One of the most cited works is the book written by Christopher Deliso “The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West”. According to Deliso (2007, p. 153–73), several jihadi training camps are located in the Sandžak region and in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Wahhabi communities controls several parts of the region crossing Kosovo, Macedonia, Sandžak and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Lastly, Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović declared in 2016 that thousands of Bosnian foreign fighters were returning home, increasing the threat to the region, influencing the bilateral relations due to the reactions of the Bosnian authorities (Vecernji 2016).

This kind of narrative has been used by several newspapers, on which Western Balkans countries are at the top ranking about foreign fighters per capita (Corradi 2018).

**Figure 1: (2002).** Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia, Book 10. Skopje: Republic of Macedonia State Statistical Office; (2011). Kosovo Population and Housing Census 2011. Prishtinë: Kosovo Agency of Statistics; (2012). Population and Population Census 2011 Tirana: Republic of the European Institute of Statistics; (2016). Census of Households and Dwellings in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2013 Sarajevo: Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina; (2017).



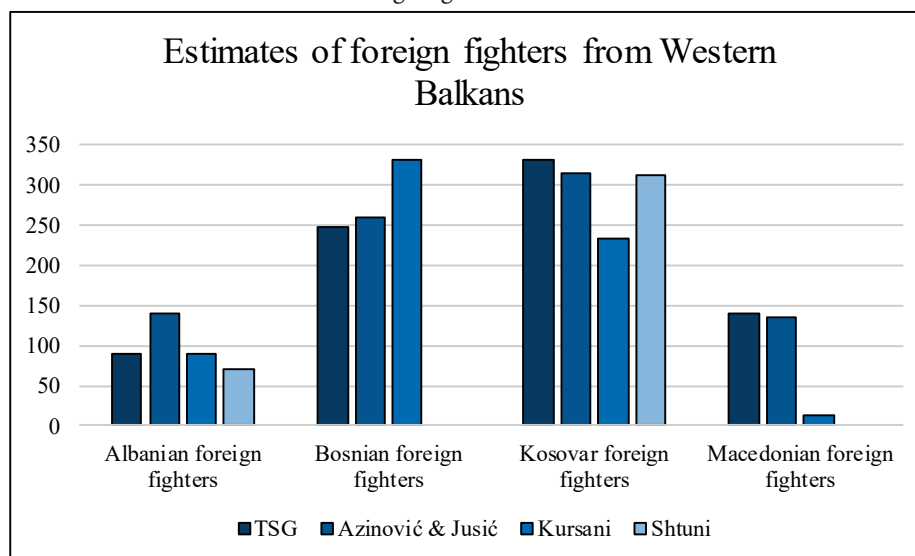
For example, Aristotle Tziampiris tried to contrast this narrative (2009). In his work, he compared the two major examples assumed by researchers in analysing violent Islamist radicalization in the Balkans: the Bosnian War and the 1999 Kosovo War. He pointed out that, although “the existence of Islamist terrorists in the Western Balkans since the 1990s

constitutes a disturbing reality that cannot be washed away” (Tziampiris, 2009, p. 218), the presence of Islamist terrorist organisations is at a very low level.

Western Balkans countries are the only ones in Europe with a native Muslim population as a legacy of the Ottoman era. Despite that in some countries such as Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro the presence of Muslims is small, in other countries i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia it is very high. Among these countries, only in the Republic of North Macedonia Muslims are a minority, while in the others they are the majority or almost the whole population as in Kosovo. The percentage of Muslim population is important to understanding and shaping the answer to our research question. Problematically, the data from the Republic of North Macedonia are quite obsolete. No others census has been made since 2002, when it was necessary as part of the Ohrid Framework Agreement after the 2001 brief conflict between Albanian rebels and Macedonian security forces.

If data about ethnic makeup could be obsolete, the latter do not display any data about foreign fighters. Several reports and papers tried to figure out the presence of Western Balkans foreign fighters in Syria for example. However, there are no certain data, only unproven single estimates. Governments are used to underestimating the phenomenon, indeed, because of the difficulties to track the departure of all foreign fighters by intelligence services (Barrett, 2014, p. 12).

**Figure 2.** Estimates of Western Balkans' foreign fighters.



The Soufan Group (Tsg) estimates that the number of Western Balkans foreign fighters in Syria is around 800 combatants, 90 from Albania, 248 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 317 from Kosovo and 140 from North Macedonia (Barrett, p. 2017, 7–9). Albanian foreign fighters have been analysed in other different reports by Vlado Azinović e Muhamed Jusić, Shpend Kursani e Adrian Shtuni. In these, Albanians were respectively 90, 140, 90 and 70 (Azinović & Jusić, p. 2016, 19; Kursani, p. 2015, 25; Shtuni, p. 2015, 11–14). About Bosnia and Herzegovina, Azinović and Jusić report that Bosnian foreign fighters number 260, while The Soufan Group estimates them at about 248 and Kursani about 330. Regarding Kosovo, Kursani reports 232 foreign fighters while Arife Muji (2017, p. 12), from the



Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, reports 312 people. The Soufan Group and Azinović and Jusić estimate respectively 330 and 314 foreign fighters in Syria. The numbers of foreign fighters from the Republic of North Macedonia are the ones which differ to a greater extent. In fact, The Soufan Group and Azinović and Jusić estimate the number of combatants in Syria respectively at about 330 and 314, while Kursani reports just 12.

These data are useful if compared with the populations of these countries, in order to understand the national dimension of the phenomenon. Moreover, comparing these data with the Muslim populations is more interesting and useful. It leads indeed to understanding the percentage of foreign fighters over the population that could be on the verge of a potential radicalization. Among these different estimates, the Tsg report seems to be the more accurate since it has been, so far, the only one which has updated such estimates in the past years.

**Table 2.** Data about foreign fighters and the impact on national demography.

Country	Foreign fighters	Population	% population
Albania	90	2 800 183	0.003%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	248	3 531 159	0.007%
Kosovo	330	1 739 825	0.018%
North Macedonia	140	2 022 547	0.006%
	F.f. per million inhabitants	F.f. per million Muslim inhabitants	
Albania	32	57	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	70	138	
Kosovo	190	198	
North Macedonia	69	207	

These data show the high number of foreign fighters per capita. Nevertheless, the impact of the number of foreign fighters should be compared with the others European countries. This points out a different overview of the phenomenon, which re-shapes the impact of the foreign fighters in the Western Balkans.

The data used to compare the number of Western Balkans' foreign fighters and the European ones who came from different reports: for the Western Balkans the census of the population and the same reports above-mentioned, mainly the Tsg reports; for the European data, the Pew Research Center seems quite exhaustive for having a general overview about the percentage of Muslims in every European Union country and Norway; for the Russian Federation, the Cia World Factbook 2017, too, gave the data related over the population.

This comparison is fundamental to understand the real impact of the foreign fighters in the Western Balkans and, then, also in European Union. In order to do so, this paper quantifies the percentage of foreign fighters in each country over the whole population and, then, over only the Muslim population.

**Table 3.** Comparison of Western Balkans and European foreign fighters. The table structure is from Kursani, S. (2015). Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Kosovar Center for Security Studies, p. 25.

Rank	Countries	Foreign fighters	% population	% Muslim population	Countries	Rank
1	<i>Kosovo</i>	330	0,018	0,055	Belgium	1
2	United Kingdom	850	0,013	0,054	Finland	2
3	<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>	248	0,007	0,049	Austria	3
4	<i>North Macedonia</i>	140	0,007	0,048	Denmark	4
5	Belgium	478	0,004	0,037	Sweden	5
6	<i>Albania</i>	90	0,003	0,032	France	6
7	Austria	296	0,003	0,030	Norway	7
8	Sweden	300	0,003	0,023	Netherlands	8
9	Denmark	145	0,002	0,021	United Kingdom	9
10	France	1910	0,002	0,018	Germany	10
11	Norway	90	0,002	0,018	<i>Kosovo</i>	11
12	Russian Federation	3417	0,002	0,016	Spain	12
13	Finland	80	0,001	0,015	Russian Federation	13
14	Germany	915	0,001	0,014	Switzerland	14
15	Netherlands	280	0,001	0,007	<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>	15
16	Switzerland	70	0,0008	0,006	<i>North Macedonia</i>	16
17	Spain	204	0,0004	0,003	<i>Albania</i>	17
18	Bulgaria	10	0,0001	0,003	Italy	18
19	Italy	110	0,0001	0,001	Bulgaria	19

The table shows how these data could be redefined. In fact, despite Western Balkans countries apparently supplying Islamic State with the largest number of foreign fighters per capita, this is not true if analysed by countries Muslim populations. Answering to the hypothesis raised above, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and the Republic of North Macedonia are at the bottom of the rankings. In contrast, countries which face a higher percentage per capita are the Belgium, the Scandinavian countries, Austria, and France. Of course, the Western Balkans and these countries have different backgrounds for the presence of Muslims. In the Western Balkans, Islam has been present since the Ottoman conquest, while in the other countries it is connected directly with the post-colonial immigration flows. The Russian Federation and Bulgaria are the only ones that share a common background with the Western Balkans, unlike the others.

However, an analysis of the foreign fighters' flows toward the Syrian soil is not sufficient. In fact, the return of foreign fighters has also to be taken into account in order to prevent future threats.



## Foreign fighters' returning to the Western Balkans: a future threat?

According to Francesco Strazzari and Eva Magdalena Stambøl, "foreign fighter returnees" will be the European major threat in the near future. According to them, the entity of the threat is directly linked with the "scale of the phenomenon" (Strazzari and Stambøl, 2015, p. 1). Opposing Strazzari and Stambøl, predictions are very hard to make, and some concerns are related to it. Mainly, there is an ethical dimension, in which prediction – or speculation – could lead to alarmism (Hegghammer, 2016).

As Thomas Hegghammer noted, there are anyway some indicators that could give us a better understating of the future. In fact, Hegghammer noticed four different trends that could not limit jihadi activism in the next ten or fifth-teen years. Among these, one is strictly connected with foreign fighters' returning phenomenon. According to him, the high presence of insurgents in the Syrian conflict leads to a bigger capability in recruiting, training, and networking future foreign fighters (Hegghammer, 2016, p. 160).

The Syrian conflict, in fact, saw the largest number of foreign fighters and, for the first time of jihadi activism, from all over the world. Recent jihadism could be considered to be strongly affected by globalisation, and I can define it as a globalised jihad (Cronin, 2002; Li & Schaub, 2004). Pre-Syria jihads could be more considered as regional jihads, in which foreign fighters came mostly from Arab countries.

Returning foreign fighters could bring the expertise learned in the Syrian War to recruit, train and create a network. In this logic, the Western Balkans could be a potential cradle of future foreign fighters. Anyway, there are some indicators that could lead us to suggest that the Western Balkans will be not.

The first is that after the on-ground defeat of Islamic State, jihadi insurgencies could be limited in some area of the world. It will be difficult for the Islamic State to found another Caliphate. Such defeat, in fact, has a negative and positive effect on the jihadi world. The first is the victory of the al Qaeda agenda over the Islamic State one. In Azzam and bin Laden ideology, the jihad was more against the so-called "far enemy", i.e. the United States and more generally the West, as well as fighting the so-called "apostate" regimes in the Middle East and Israel (Byman, 2015 47–48). Kepel (2003, p. 104) defines the idea of the "far enemy" as "an extremely rational tactic with specific aims". The United States, along with the more general West, were seen by al Qaeda as the protectors of the Saudi regime, the real main target of bin Laden's strategy. In bin Laden's opinion the most important action al Qaeda should have taken was a regime change in Saudi Arabia. For the Islamic State, the prior goal was to establish the Caliphate, which happened. At its peak, the Islamic State controlled a large portion of Syrian and Iraqi territory, with around ten million people living there (Karklis & Meko, p. 2017; BBC 2018). The positive effect could be linked with the symbology of radical ideology. As the 1871 Paris Commune had a strategic meaning for the Communists, the same could happen with the Caliphate. Understanding the importance of symbols is not the real aim of this research paper, and further studies could be conducted in order to analyse the strategic effect of the Islamic State's defeat as a future symbol.

The second indicator that could lead us to consider the Balkans as not a future cradle of foreign fighters, or jihadists as well, is the positive counter-terrorism strategy adopted by the individual countries.

Kosovo elaborated its counter-terrorism strategy in 2012. In this document, Kosovar authorities underlined the necessities to “create an institutional mechanism and coordinate the activities to face security challenges in general, as well as taking measures to prevent and fight terrorism in particular” (Republic of Kosovo 2012, 5). According to Cezary Michalczuk<sup>1</sup>, Head of Rule of Law and Legal Section of the European External Action Service (Eeas) in Kosovo, Kosovar authorities are effectively facing this threat. Albania also adopted its own strategy, in which the cooperation between civil society and local communities is fundamental in order to face this challenge. Moreover, improvements in the labour market, employment rate and educational system are necessary (Azinović & Jusić, 2016). Bosnia and Herzegovina also decided to control and keep registration of the personal movement of the people considered to be under threat of radicalisation (Bosnia and Herzegovina Council of Ministers 2015, 10).

Moreover, each country adopted legislation in order to persecute foreign fighters after their return. In 2014 Bosnia and Herzegovina emended article 162b of its penal code, reinforcing the legal measures that could be taken against anyone who “organises, directs, trains, equips or mobilises individuals or groups in the purpose of their association in any way with foreign military, foreign paramilitary or foreign para-police formations that are acting outside the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina” and who “joins in any way a foreign military, foreign paramilitary or foreign para-police formation, trained, equipped or mobilised as specified in paragraph (1) of this Article” (Azinović & Jusić, 2015, p. 60). In 2014, Northern Macedonia also adopted a similar legislation. Article 322-a states that anyone who joins or organises, trains, funds, or has any direct contact with foreign military and paramilitary groups could be incarcerated (Republic of North Macedonia 2015, 12). This law, anyway, has no retroactive effect and the Northern Macedonian intelligence must monitor who returned to the country before the law came into force (Selimi & Stojkovski, 2016). Albania and Kosovo updated their legislation as well in 2014 and 2015. Kosovar legislation is actually the most severe in the whole Western Balkan region (Fleto- ra Zyrtare 2014; Metodieva 2018, 12).

The third indicator is regarding the nationalities of the plotters and terrorists. For this indicator we will use the excellent work of Petter Nesser, who created a database of all the terrorist attacks carried out in Europe since 1990 (Nesser, 2008; Nesser, 2014). He divides the attacks into three different categories, according to some factors that make us understand whether the attacks were carried out due to jihadist ideology. The first category comprehends all the attacks presenting incontrovertible proofs regarding planning and the realisation of the attack. Moreover, jihadist ideology reasons have to be clear, and the target too. The second category has a less clear hint in the understanding of the ideology, the target, or the information regarding the attackers. The last is regarding all the attacks for which there is vague and limited information. Analysing the period 1994–2007, Nesser identified only one attack in the Western Balkans, considering this to be a category two attack. In the year 2008–2013, Nesser did not identify any jihadi attack carried out by Western Balkans citizens. He categorised the attack committed by Arid Uka as a category 2 attack. Despite that he shouted “Allāhu akbar” while attacking, some proofs lead to understand it was not a clear jihadi attack. The same regarding the 2015 terrorist attack by Enes Omeragić (Nezavisne 2015).

1 Personal conversation with Cezary Michalczuk, Head of Rule of Law and Legal Section of the European External Action Service (Eeas), on the 06/21/2018.

There were more cases of terrorist attacks in the Western Balkans took place, in which were not taken into account by Nesser. In this regard, using Nesser's categories and combining them with the data presented by Sergio Pains (2016, p. 128–132), I can analyse the whole number of terrorist attacks in the Western Balkans and understand their characteristics. The newspaper articles are used in order to reconstruct the dynamics of the attacks and to categorise them into Nesser's model.

**Table 3.** Author's re-elaboration relying on Nesser categorization of the data presented by Pains, S. (2016). *La mezzaluna d'Europa*. Brescia: La Scuola, pp. 128–132.

Year	Terrorists	Nationality	Target	Death	Injured	City	Nation	Category
1997	Various	Bahrein, Saudi Arabia	Police station	0	29	Mostar	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1
2002	Muamer Topalović	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Croat family	3	1	Kostajnica	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2
2005	Mirsad Bektašević	Serbia (Sandžak)	U.K. Embassy	0	0	Sarajevo	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1
2006	Vedad Hafizović	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Mother	1	0	Sarajevo	Bosnia and Herzegovina	3
2010	Haris Čaušević	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Police station	1	6	Bugojno	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1
2011	Arid Uka	Kosovo	Airport	2	2	Frankfurt	Germany	2
2011	Mevdliv Jašarević	Serbia (Sandžak)	U.S.A. Embassy	0	1	Sarajevo	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1
2015	Nerdi Ibrić	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Police station	1	2	Zvornik	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2
2015	Enes Om-eragić	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Betting room	2	3	Sarajevo	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2
2015	Various	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Civilians	0	0	Sarajevo	Bosnia and Herzegovina	3
2016	Various	Albania, Kosovo	Civilians	0	0	Tirana	Albania	2
2017	Various	Kosovo	Civilians	0	0	Venice	Italy	2

The only cases we can categorise in the first category of Nesser's model are the 1997 terrorist attack happened in Mostar, against a police station, and the attacks carried out respectively by Mirsad Bektašević, Haris Čaušević, and Mevlid Jašarević. In these cases, the jihadi ideology appears to be clear.

Nerdin Ibrić's terrorist attack appears to be connected more with a revenge-frustration feeling, having attacked a police station in the Serb-majority city of Zvornik in Republika Srpska, the Serb-majority entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. His father was killed in Zvornik during the 1992–1995 civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Beta 2015).

Vedad Hafizović's matricide is clearly a category 3 attack. Despite it being committed due to religious problems, it has no connection with jihadi terrorism. The relatives shared the same religion and, moreover, Hafizović had psychiatric problems (Index 2006).

Muamer Topalović's murdering of a Croat-Bosnian family seems to be more related with the 1992–1995 civil war legacy rather than religious violent extremism (Index 2002).

Regarding the 2015 planned attack and the Tirana and Venice planning, the suspects were not taken to trial. For these reasons, having no more information about these, I categorise respectively as category 3 and 2 attacks (Benazzo, 2016; Dearden, 2016; Squires, 2017). Table 5 summarised the categorisation crossing the data presented in Pains (2017), several newspaper articles and the Nesser's model of categorisation.

Other indicators, anyway, could lead to a worsening of the situation in the Western Balkans. The first is the fragile state-building process (Koneska, 2014) and the economic stagnation of these countries, in particular taking into account the employment rate. The connection between youth bulges and violent political mobilization has already been deeply analysed (Urdal, 2004). The second indicator is deeply connected with the role of prison and its effect in radicalising people (Brandon, 2009; Kepel, 2008; Neumann, 2010; Roy, 2017). Incarcerating people without any working de-radicalisation or counter-radicalisation programme could be a deeper factor of jihadism.

## Results and conclusions

Are the Western Balkans a high-rate region for jihadist radicalization? The data analysed and presented in table 3 answer my hypothesis clearly. Taking in account only the number of foreign fighters per capita, the Western Balkans represents a serious threat. Despite this, in contrast with the analysis already done (Azinović & Jusić, 2016; Barret, 2017; Kursani, 2015; Muji, 2017; Shtuni, 2015), comparing the number of foreign fighters per country with the relative Muslim population, the possible share of population that could be affected by jihadist violent extremism, Western Balkans countries are at the bottom of the ranking table. Notwithstanding this, it is hard to speculate about the future. In fact, although we could understand that the Western Balkans was not a cradle of foreign fighters, confirming our hypothesis, the same could be not true in the future. The negative and positive indicators showed in the previous paragraph are not entirely predictive about what could happen. The shift from al Qaeda to the Islamic State agenda is important not just in analysing the foreign fighters' phenomenon, from terrorism to insurgency, but to try to understand what will happen. Moreover, not all of the foreign fighters are going to be active after returning to their home country. As Barrett (2017) argues, individuals return home for different reason. Some of them are disillusioned, others could be tired of the extreme violence of a civil war. Only some of them come back home because they want to use their expertise for recruiting or training future foreign fighters. Hegghammer argues that the next 10–15 years could face an increment of jihadi activity in Europe. The activity that Hegghammer (2016) takes in account is related quite completely to terrorism activity. The role of foreign fighters could be in this case misunderstood. How they will affect the future jihadi activities? Are the foreign fighters the main influencers of an increase of jihadi terrorism? Which is the link between terrorists and foreign fighters? Could foreign fighters engage in training terrorists instead of future insurgents? How can returned foreign fighters increase the length of a civil war? Many are the questions I can raise regarding this topic. Future research must be made in order to answer to these questions. Carenzi (2017) wrote that 18% of terrorist attacks were committed by jihadi veterans. Which is the causal link that connects jihadi veterans and terrorism? Hegghammer's speculation

is linked with the jihadi activity in Europe, meaning, as I have written above, terrorist activity in Europe. If there is a stricter correlation between returnee foreign fighters and insurgency-training, the increase of the activity should be probably correlated with future civil war scenarios. This type of speculation, where a civil war will happen, is impossible to make. There are no precise indicators about where and when a civil war will break out.

Moreover, considering Olivier Roy's (2017) theory about youth deprivation and jihadism, as contemporary form of rebellion, could lead to thinking that in the future jihadism, as well as the extreme political terrorism in the past, could be replaced with other ideologies, religions, etc.

Analysing Western Balkans' jihadism, the indicators could lead us to imagine a lower degree of jihadi activity compared with other geographical regions such as the Middle East, the Caucasus, Russia, and Western Europe. The main problem, anyway, is strictly connected with the questions I raised above. If a clear link exists between foreign fighters and terrorists' training, the former could increase the risk. If foreign fighters are more interested in training future insurgents, the increase of jihadi activity is more connected with a future battleground instead of European countries. Moreover, some returnees can affect the duration of an on-going civil war. Foreign fighters do not come back only after the end of a civil war, but they can come back before the end. How can they increase the duration of a civil war because of their activity of recruitment and training?

The foreign fighters phenomenon, though is highly popular in academic research, has many obscure parts. A better definition of the phenomenon, and its study, is necessary in order to answer the many questions raised and to face the future challenges.

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